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Real Risk or Overrated? Environmental Migration and Violent Conflict

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“Climate change threatens to cause the largest refugee crisis in human history” – headlines like this are commonplace in today’s media landscape. It is a short way from such assumptions to the conclusion that “migrant floods” will contribute to violent conflict in various locations. However, there is little systematic research on the interrelation between global environmental change and migration as well as between environmental migration and violent conflict. Neither is there conclusive evidence for the expected “migrant floods”, nor for the causality between

environmental migration and violent conflict. This is where this contribution starts.

Generally, environmental stress can lead to three primary types of reactions, mediated by social, political, economic and cultural factors: passive acceptance, active in situ adaptation, and migration. Thus, migration is one possible response to high vulnerability and a potential adaptation measure to the effects of climate change. Furthermore, climate change can affect already existing migration patterns, e.g. by pastoralists. Based on our research, we discern four types of migration patterns in the context of climate change. These patterns differ in their likelihood of violent conflict.

Climate disaster refugees

Climate disaster refugees are understood as those who have left their homes because of the effects of climate change, most likely fast-onset natural disasters. In other words, when and where living conditions have dropped below bearable conditions, people tend to move. They generally migrate to the nearest location where conditions are bearable, which is often either in hastily assembled encampments of international humanitarian organizations, or in locations where migrants have relatives or other social relations. Climate disaster refugees tend to migrate back to the regions they were forced to abandon as soon as conditions allow it.

The potential for violent conflict emanating from or being aggravated by climate disaster refugees largely depends on the characteristics of the population movement (number of people, length of stay etc.) and the conditions in the

receiving regions (pre-existing violent conflict dynamics, resource availability, identity issues to name but a few). However, in general the likelihood of population movements resulting from climate disasters leading to violent conflict is low. There are several important reasons for this; one is the large-scale availability of humanitarian assistance in most disaster cases, which alleviates immediate scarcities; another is that, temporary disaster refugees are less likely to compete for resources such as land or employment opportunities; and significantly, disaster refugees are generally not in a position to riot.

Permanent climate refugees

Climate-related disasters can also lead to more permanent forms of migration, especially when the physical environment is vanishing or permanently uninhabitable because of the climatic changes. A popular example is climate change-induced sea level rise threatening for instance small islands and coastal areas. Such displacement patterns are at times related to migration and resettlement plans organized by governments as a last resort in extreme cases to protect civilians. The risk of displacement is particularly high in poor countries where government and population have not yet invested in climate change resilience measures, rendering them particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

The likelihood of violent conflict increases when climate-related refugees stay permanently. Bangladesh is an example of this. Such conflicts are often over scarce resources and/or employment opportunities in the new location. They tend to intensify when refugees are no longer perceived as only temporary co-residents, but permanent competitors

for resources. Furthermore, in most cases external humanitarian assistance will wither over time, thereby exacerbating conflict over resources. Nevertheless, whether permanent refugee movements in the wake of environmental change become problematic depends on a host of factors, such as the intensity of the conflict over interests and identity, and the recent history of violent conflict in the receiving region.

Ecological-economic migrants

The majority of current population movements worldwide are driven by livelihood strategies and/or labor migration. Often, only single members of a household migrate although the decision is made collectively by the household or group to which the migrant belongs. This kind of migration falls into one of two categories: either short-term (seasonal, circular) or long-term (life-cycle). It requires capital for the migration in order to re-locate and sustain oneself during the initial period of the job search. While the main driver is income, the goal is to economically diversify livelihood options for those left behind, usually via remittances. Environmental changes may affect such population movements. However, research shows that such effects only impact on human migration together with other factors. One of the main factors in determining the impact of this type of climate change induced migration is the level of livelihoods in both potential sending and receiving regions.

We found that the potential for eco-economic migration leading to armed violence is relatively low, except in extreme cases where there is a particularly strong identity clash between migrants and local population. Since 'eco-economic' migrants mostly decide whether and where to

migrate based on cost-benefit analyses, they are likely to accept a potential mistreatment in the receiving area as long as the benefits outweigh the (expected) disadvantages. However, a case in point are high income differentials: migration from very poor to very rich regions carries particular risks of violence where the local population is reluctant to integrate migrants into existing social and economic arrangements and institutions.

Climate-affected migrants

Natural resources like land and water create the mere foundation of livelihoods of some migrant populations, such as herders in parts of Africa and Asia. These groups are particularly affected by changing environmental conditions as they may have to change their migration patterns, or are even forced to give up their lifestyles. Changes in migration patterns forced on non-sedentary people occur either directly due to environmental factors or indirectly due to sedentary peoples' reaction to environmental change, which often influence the livelihoods of traditional migrants. Depending on the scale of the environmental changes, the numbers, organization and characteristics of the non-sedentary people, this may lead to intense conflict over resources, often linked to identity clashes, for instance between herders and farmers.

Such conflicts are already quite common in most resource scarce areas with a high percentage of non-sedentary people, for instance in Kenya. In many instances, however, conflict management institutions, such as councils of elders, exist to solve such conflicts. A higher frequency and intensity of adverse weather, or the erosion of the authority of conflict management institutions may, however, lead to a

breakdown of such arrangements. The potential for such conflicts to turn to violence increases when there is a prior history of violence, or when exclusivist identity groups are armed.

Conflict-prone receiving regions

Based on the above discussion, one can identify three types of receiving regions where the likelihood of violent conflict resulting from incoming migration is particularly high – irrespective of the migration patterns. While being related to vulnerability and adaption, which are often summarized in a receiving region's integration potential, the interests over resource use or job availability, as well as identities, can be crucial for the willingness to accept migrants. Three types of regions stand out as particularly conflict prone:

Regions with extreme resource scarcity

Absolute scarcity of resources such as land or water needs to be seen in relation to population density and the availability of external assistance. Extremely resource-scarce areas are conflict-prone and therefore unlikely to be the choice of eco-economic migrants; temporary climate disaster refugees will generally benefit from external assistance. Particularly problematic from the point of view of violent conflict are permanent climate refugees as well as climate-affected migrants, who have little choice regarding the location and little capacity to adapt to climate change other than to claim, and if necessary to fight for, scarce resources.

Regions with high levels of conflict

Wherever migrants move into regions where levels of conflict over interests or identity are already high, the potential for them to become a driver, or even trigger, of violent conflict, is comparatively high. This is particularly true when migrants are shifting the balance in identity conflicts because they swell the numbers of particular identity groups.

Regions with exclusive identities

Finally, migration into communities, which – for whatever reasons – are unwilling to accept people with other cultural background need to be taken into account. Such reluctance is not necessarily related to resource scarcity; nevertheless, discourses in receiving regions often emphasize economic issues, such as a reduction in the standard of living, or increased competition for jobs. Furthermore, such communities may have strong identities and fear the erosion of traditions, customs and institutions by an influx of migrants from another cultural background.

This contribution has shown that the relationship between global environmental change, migration and violent conflict is complex and defies simple and sensationalist conclusions. More research still needs to be done to fully understand how climate change, human mobility, and conflict escalation processes intersect and interact; the presented typology may be helpful in efforts to desecuritize migration in the context of global warming.

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